

ADDING DIVERSITY FROM ABROAD:

The Foreign-Born Population, 1999

About 10 percent of Americans are foreign born — less than the highest share this century (15 percent in 1910), but more than the lowest share (5 percent in 1970).

Having all the facts on America's growing cultural diversity is essential for good government and good business. In some parts of the country, the characteristics of the foreign-born population must be taken into account when developing educational programs, designing street signs, and providing social services. However, this population defies generalization, because it is both diverse and rapidly changing.

Changes in the immigration laws from 1965 to 1990 contributed to increased migration from abroad and generated greater diversity among the newcomers. The foreign-born population in the United States grew from 10 million in 1970,¹ the lowest total in this century, to 14 million in 1980, and 20 million in 1990. In March 1999, the estimated foreign-born population in the United States was 26 million — not statistically different than the high reached in 1997.

Words That Count

- **The foreign-born population** refers to people who were not U.S. citizens at birth.
- **The native population** refers to people who were either born in the United States or a U.S. Island Area, such as Puerto Rico, or who were born abroad of a U.S. citizen parent.

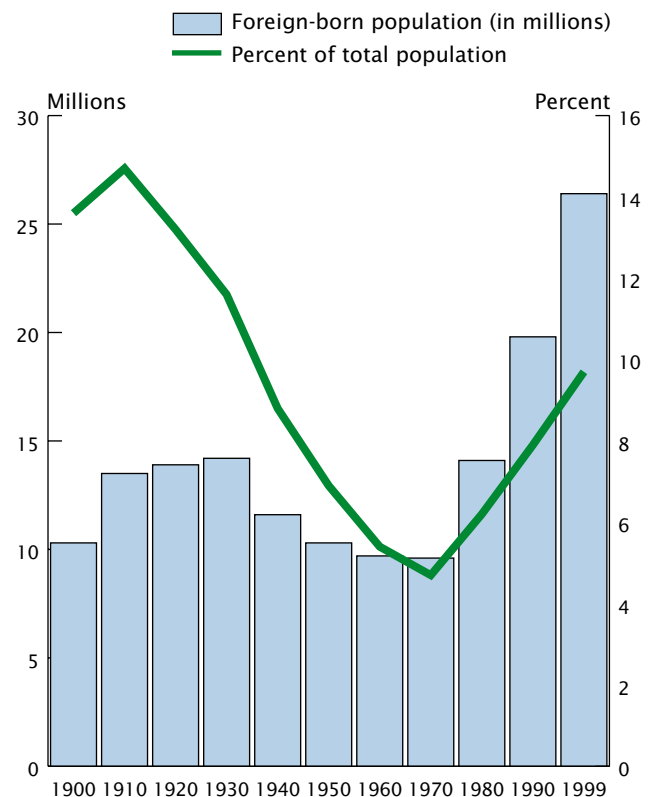
¹ The number of people in the United States who were foreign born was 9.6 million in 1970 and 9.7 million in 1960.

Since 1970, the composition of the foreign-born population has changed dramatically.

Between 1970 and 1999, the share of foreign-born U.S. residents from Europe dropped from 62 percent to 16 percent. Over the same period, the share of the foreign-born from Asia tripled, from 9 percent to 27 percent, and the share from Latin America increased from 19 percent to 51 percent. In 1999, two-thirds of foreign-born Latin Americans were from Central America and Mexico.

Figure 17-1.

The Foreign-Born Population: 1900-99



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 to 1990 censuses and March 1999 Current Population Survey.

Thirty-five percent of the foreign-born population entered the U.S. in the 1990s and 30 percent in the 1980s. More than one in every three foreign-born people in the United States (37 percent) was a naturalized citizen, according to the 1999 Current Population Survey (CPS). Among those who entered the country before 1980, 79 percent were naturalized.

Significant differences exist between the foreign-born and native populations, as well as important differences among the major foreign-born population groups.

In 1999, 25 percent of family households maintained by a foreign-born person contained five or more members, compared with 13 percent of family households maintained by a native-born person. About 40 percent of families with a Central American or Mexican householder were this large, compared with 11 percent of those with a European householder.

The foreign-born were less likely than the native population to have a high school diploma. Among the population aged 25 and older, 66 percent of the foreign-born were high school graduates, compared with 86 percent of the native-born population. The share of high school graduates ranged from 83 percent for Asians to 48 percent of Latin Americans.²

In 1998, 18 percent of the foreign-born population lived in poverty, compared with 12 percent of the native-born population.³ Those without U.S. citizenship were twice as likely

² For more information on educational attainment, see Chapter 9.

³ The 1999 Current Population Survey collects poverty statistics for 1998. See Chapter 13 for more information on the 1999 poverty rates for the foreign-born population.

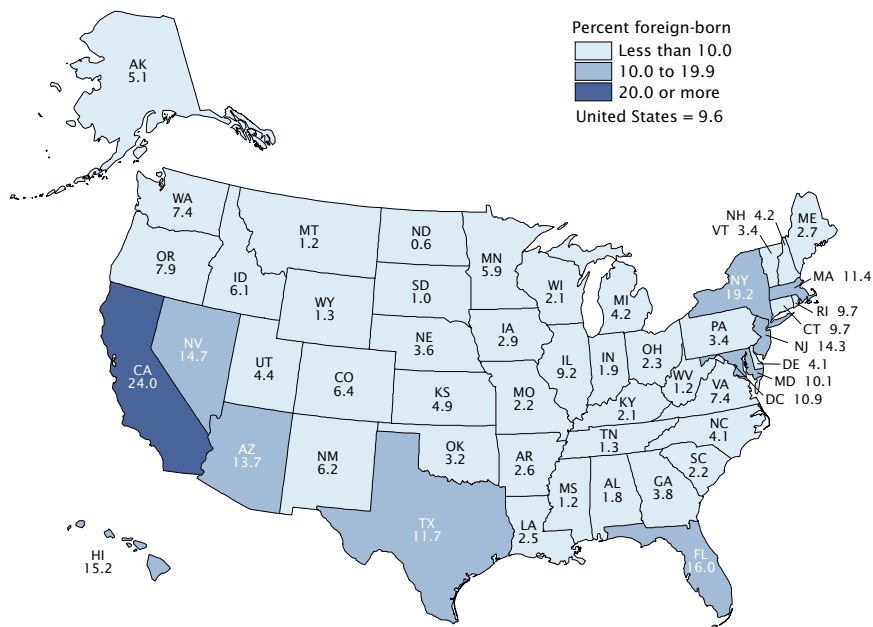
as naturalized citizens to be poor (22 percent compared with 11 percent). The general poverty rates for the foreign-born population ranged from 11 percent for both Europeans and Asians to 24 percent for Latin Americans. Yet these figures masked further differences within each group. For example, among Latin Americans, the poverty rate for Central Americans and Mexicans was 28 percent.

The foreign-born population was highly concentrated in a few states, according to the 1999 CPS.

In 1999, California had the highest percentage of foreign-born residents, 24 percent.⁴ In fact, California alone accounted for 30 percent of the foreign-born population living in the United States. Two out of every three foreign-born people living in the United States could be found in just five states: California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.

⁴ The percent foreign-born in California is not statistically different than the percent foreign-born in New York state.

Figure 17-2.
Foreign-Born Population by State: 1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

- For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Report: *The Foreign Born Population in the United States: March 1999* by Angela Brittingham.
- Look for complete reports and detailed tables on the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Click on "F" and select "Foreign-Born Population Data."
- Contact the Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau at 301-457-2403 or e-mail pop@census.gov.
- For information on publications and other resources, see Appendix A.